## Leadership out of control [Review of: S Weisband (2008) Leadership at a distance: Research in technology-supported work]

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# LEADERSHIP OUT OF CONTROL?

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Weisband, S. (Ed.) (2008). *Leadership at a Distance: Research in Technologically-Supported Work*. New York: Erlbaum. 270 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8058-5097-00 Softcover, $39.95.

*Leadership at a Distance: Research in Technology Supported Work* deals with an interesting and significant topic to both scientists and practitioners in various domains. As the core activities of production, consumption, and circulation as well as their components (management, technology, information) are more and more organized on a global scale (Castells, 2009), the challenges to the traditional view on leadership have become apparent. One of these challenges is the geographic distribution of work and the technological advances and competencies required to direct distributed teams. Editor Suzanne Weisband, associate professor at the University of Arizona, states in her introduction that because "many more people have the information to make decisions for themselves, leadership is no longer the sole responsibility of the CEO; it can be found at every level of an organization" (p. 3). Although it remains unclear what she meant by leadership, it would be naïve to believe that large organizations have been led by just one person, or say, a board of directors. Yukl (1999) mentioned 10 years ago that the leadership actions of any individual leader are, by far, less important than the collective leadership supplied by members of the organization.

The book is divided into five sections, and I will discuss the most appealing studies of each section. The first section describes the new challenges and competences needed to exercise leadership at a distance. The second section captures a collection of field studies of leadership in distributed work settings. In a study on the consequences of leading geographically dispersed teams, Cummings (chapter 3) found that frequent face-to-face communication between leaders and distributed teams is related positively to performance. However, as Cummings correctly noticed, face-to-face communication is normally limited in distributed environments. Cummings claimed, therefore, that informal face-to-face communication can be easily replaced by email and mobile phone contact. Unfortunately, it would seem that his statement is not supported by his own research; he does not find a clear relation between use of email or mobile phones in communication and team performance (p. 47).

Bradner and Mark (chapter 4) investigated the role of collocation in distance collaboration and examined how it affects leadership. They report that technological systems may help to improve coordination between two distributed teams because these systems ease information exchange. However, technology appeared to be unable to enhance trust among members of distributed teams (p. 66). Face-to-face contacts in the initial stage of the project are found to be vital in creating shared work norms and domain expertise.

Xiao et al. (chapter 5) studied how physicians communicated when they were with the surgery team in the same room and when they were remotely observing the surgery with videoconferencing technologies. The study revealed that when the leader was distant, the communication between leader and a senior fellow, and from the senior fellow to the junior resident, increased, while at the same time instructions given decreased significantly.

The third section in the book comprises three experiments in remote leadership. Balthazard et al. (chapter 7) found that face-to-face teams are more likely to demonstrate a higher level of leadership, while virtual teams more often demonstrated a lower level of leadership (p. 128). Because the interaction style of teams is found to be associated with the level of leadership, the authors proposed that preparatory interventions (team building activities or face-to-face introductions) are required before virtual teams can start their tasks effectively.

Stasser and Augustinova (chapter 8) discovered that dispersed teams needed to know how information access was distributed across individual team members. In this study, the authors investigated how shared and unique information was communicated upward from team members to the team captain and the commander. Some teams received feedback after a scenario about what information had reached the commander, so they were able to adjust their communication strategies over time to correct or diminish information biases (p. 156). Moreover,



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some groups knew how the information was distributed across teams. The results indicated that, even when teams know what information reached the commander in the foregoing scenario, partially shared information was communicated more often than unique information. As a result, partially shared information was more likely to reach the commander than unique information was. Only when team members had knowledge about how the information was distributed across the teams were they able to communicate more unique than partially shared information. In the second experimental design, participants could choose between sharing information (as in the first study) or forwarding recommendations to the commander. The results revealed that even though the teams knew they had little information and their recommendations could be easily contradicted by "black spots" in the information, the teams preferred to send recommendations to the commander. As a consequence, the amount of partially shared information and unique information reaching the commander dropped by 44% and 28%, respectively. These results have valuable implications for related research domains, such as military and emergency response management. For instance, a major concern in the crisis coordination literature is efficient exchange of information across distributed teams (Comfort, Ko, & Zagorecki, 2004). The Stasser and Augustinova study suggests that when team members know who can access particular types of information, team members are more likely to communicate information that is uniquely available to them (p. 159). Hence, coordination may be improved when first responders are more aware of their local expertise and information position in crisis situations.

The fourth section of the book is focused on leading large-scale distributed collaborations. In my opinion this section is poorly integrated in the book; these studies are not entirely concerned with leadership at a distance (chapters 11 and 12), but rather with the relationship between owners or structures of online communities and the individual members. Maybe for this reason, any sound definition of leadership in the last four chapters is missing. Despite the theoretical relevance of studying online communities, I found these chapters a minor contribution to the book. The Butler et al. (chapter 9) study, for instance, is a replication of an earlier study in 2002 and draws upon data collected in 1998. Information technologies transform rapidly, so these results may be of little scientific value. An illustrative example is the finding that "formal leaders of an online community need to have more than technical skills to maintain the online site, but they also require social responsibilities to build relationships and motivate members to contribute" (p. 250). In light of social network websites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, I found these results to be obvious and outdated.

After reading the book, I felt that the most fascinating conclusion remains unaddressed. After years of technological advances, it would seem that formal leadership is still specifically obtained by face-to-face communication. When teams work distributed across the environment, the influence of formal leaders decreases while leadership within the team is likely to emerge. The observation that distribution of work is accompanied by fragmentation of power and emergence of local leadership has been documented extensively (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). However, the important contribution of this book is that it reconfirms the notion that information technology alone is not sufficient to lead distributed teams. The compelling question therefore remains how formal leaders should deal with this emergent "local" leadership within distributed teams. Notwithstanding the fact that shared leadership should be encouraged nowadays (p. 5), there still may be an imperative to exercise control on geographically dispersed teams. For instance, distributed teams may adapt to unethical behavior when it is left unquestioned by the informal leader. Consequentially, tensions may arise among the formal leader, the informal leader, and individual members. However, this theme tends to be overlooked in the current literature on leadership, and this book is no exception to the rule. Another point of criticism is unilateral interpretation of leadership styles. Most of the studies are concerned with the transformational and transactional leadership divide, while alternative typologies of leadership styles such as the contingency approach (Fiedler, 1972; House, 1971) are left untouched. This perspective may help researchers and practitioners understand how distributed teams can be motivated and facilitated by their formal leaders to more effectively perform certain tasks.

In short, Weisband and collaborators have delivered some readable and important work on the subject of distant leadership. Although the book could benefit from minor improvements (in some chapters descriptions of

participants or excerpts of scenarios are lacking), it offers an insight into the leadership of dispersed teams and some valuable recommendations for practitioners dealing with distributed teams. But the most significant contribution of the book is to reveal how little we actually know about distant leadership. The book should be praised therefore as a wake-up call for anyone not involved in studying distant leadership.

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